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ABSTRACT

Four ethical problems resulting from a fieldwork study of elementary education student teachers are explored. The problems include: acquiring permission to execute the study; how far to dig into personal lives to extract necessary information; the pitfalls of doing collaborative research; and how much information can be revealed without endangering the participant's positive image. Three purposes that guided the study were: (1) quality assessment of the elementary education student teaching experience from multiple perspectives; (2) measurement of the effects of prerequisite experiences for successful student teaching preparation; and (3) compilation of information about student teachers to be used in longitudinal studies. Most importantly, however, was the exposure of the complexities of the student teaching experience previously found to be resistant to documentation. A major implication is that ethical problems, given the bureaucratic and interpersonal climate in urban institutions, may be unresolvable rather than simply a hindrance to the researchers and participants. (GK)

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Ethics in Fieldwork Research:

A Case Study

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Abstract

Most fieldwork studies report findings but fail to deal with ethical problems encountered during their execution. This paper concentrates on four ethical problems which arose during the conduct of a field-work investigation of the life experiences of three student teachers. The four problems were: acquiring permission to begin the study; how far to dig into personal lives to extract necessary information; the pitfalls of doing collaborative research; "the more a participant tells, the worse he/she looks." A major implication is that ethical problems, given the current bureacratic and interpersonal climate in urban institutions (universities and city school districts) may be unresolvable, rather than simply a minor hindrance to the researchers and participants.

Ethics in Fieldwork Research: A Case Study

Doing fieldwork as a member of any institution, especially fieldwork involving the study of urban education systems, can have some extremely serious negative consequences if ethical issues are not carefully considered. Unfortunately fieldworkers, whether they be in anthropology, sociology or education, are prone to burying their ethicality problems in unmarked graves — alive or dead. Voluminous codes have been established to supposedly deal with ethical concerns (witness the American Anthropological Association Code of Ethics), but more often than not fieldworkers follow a simple dictum which is nicely encapsulated in the title of a course in beginning fieldwork methods at a west coast university: "Who Gets Screwed So You Can Do Your Fieldwork?"[1]

In a break from convention, this paper deemphasizes the findings from a carefully done fieldwork study of three student teachers and concentrates instead on presenting four ethical problems which arose during the study. Some of the implications arising from their occurrence will be examined in the final section.

We should briefly report the results of the fieldwork study conducted in Spring, 1979, regarding the experiences of three elementary education student teachers, their cooperating teachers and their university supervisor. These three general purposes guided the study:

a. to assess the quality of the elementary education student teaching experience, from multiple perspectives;

b. to measure the effects of prerequisite experiences (such as other courses and field experiences) for preparing students to successfully complete student teaching;

c. to begin to compile information about student teachers which could be used in conducting longitudinal follow-up studies of elementary education graduates and the elementary education program.

In focusing specifically on the student teaching experience the researchers attempted to organize their observations around a series of questions commonly dealt with in recent research conducted on student teaching. Also, since multiple perspectives were available, specific questions were developed which relate to each of the three primary actors in the student teaching setting, i.e., student teacher, cooperating teacher and university supervisor.

With the grand tour question, "Given the university supervisor-student teacher-copperating teacher triadic relationship, what are the antecedents and consequences of one member's behavior for all the others?" in mind, the study was based on a threefold position.

One, student teaching is a common experience in schools in education, and many assumptions are made about those going through the experience, those supervising the experience, and those offering their classrooms so the experience may take place. But assumptions are quite often unfounded in effect.

Two, although often done, there is no need to use testimony to reach conclusions about student teachers and their supervision. There are, here and there, well-executed studies which bear upon the issue. This study was designed to especially focus on several key indicators which the previous literature had pointed to as possibly important.

Three, although often done, it is extremely dangerous to reduce any complex activity or setting to a single set of variables. Our study came about as we recognized the seemingly abundant descriptive data about the general nature of student teaching, but noted the obvious lack of intimate knowledge about what happens to student teachers, university supervisors and cooperating teachers. The genesis of the study reported here, then, comes from efforts to conduct longitudinal studies on the effectiveness of our teacher education programs, documenting the "what is" of student teaching. This study applied socio-anthropological techniques in a first-hand observation of the traditional triad of student teaching, in an attempt to answer the question posed by Fuller and Bown (1975, p. 52) of "What is out there?"

THE STUDY

The methodology used in this study was intended to be as distinct a departure from conventional experimental techniques as the designers could possibly make it. The purpose of the study was to expose those complexities of the student teaching experience that have in the past been found to be resistant to documentation. The research design was carefully chosen to enhance this objective.

Design. The most important single feature of the design was the intended collaborative interaction among student teachers, cooperating teachers, university supervisor, and researchers. To maximize this interaction, both participants and observers purposely shared information. This possibility was built into the design by having the university supervisor take a major part in the actual research effort -- she

was simultaneously participant and researcher. Both student teachers and cooperating teachers were given full disclosure rights to examine, add to, delete, or provide alternative views of the data. The researchers stressed throughout the study that active collaboration was essential for the successful conduct of the study. In graphic form, then, the information lines among participants are represented in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

In this figure, the solid lines represent direct and equal lines of communication. The dashed lines represent more guarded lines of communication. As can be seen, these more guarded lines occured primarily between parties whose roles were complementary -- that is, between student teachers and university supervisor or cooperating teacher and supervisor. In addition, the diagram shows that a research relationship did not exist between the student teachers and the cooperating teachers, since this kind of relationship would not have occured naturally.

In retrospect, the intended design functioned quite well. Communication among all parties was not completely equalized throughout the study; as an example, Researcher 2 was able to build an almost classic researcher-informant relationship with Student Teacher 2, while Researcher 1's trustworthiness was severely questioned several times by Student Teacher 3. For the most part, however, the design worked as intended.

Participants. Three student teachers in an elementary education program at The Ohio State University were randomly chosen from among 115 student teachers, and were asked to participate in the study. These three student teachers were assigned to an urban elementary school which was alloted student teachers; their in-building assignments were entirely chosen by the building principal. Researcher 3 assumed responsibilities for their supervision during the 11-week period in which this study was conducted. Cooperating teacher 1, 2 and 3 were each regular, full-time staff members at the school, who were selected by the principal to receive student teachers.

Setting. The school and classrooms which eventually became well-known to the authors were traditional, urban environments in a large urban school district. Student Teacher 1 was assigned to a sixth grade; Student Teacher 2 and 3 were assigned to a second grade. The setting for a weekly seminar on issues in student teaching was an on-campus office at The Ohio State University.

How the Study Was Done. The procedures were selected to provide as complete a documentation of the student teaching experience, with

as little intrusion into the normal routine as possible. In early April, 1979, the three student teachers described under the Participants section met with their cooperating teachers for the first time to plan their entry into the classrooms. During the first week in April the student teachers also met briefly with the university supervisor who scheduled the first of the weekly seminars and introduced the study to the student teachers. In addition, during this week, the university supervisor went to the school and oriented the cooperating teachers about the study and other administrative matters concerning student teaching. From this point on the student teachers carried out their normal routine which usually consisted of spending each day in their classrooms and meeting once a week on campus for the "contemporary issues" seminar. As with most student teaching, a gradual takeover process occurred so that by the ninth week each student teacher had taken full responsibility for planning and executing a two-week block of lessons.

Imbedded within this routine for the student teachers was a pre-experience interview, a weekly observation by one of the researchers, and weekly (or more often) interviews. The cooperating teachers were interviewed on a bi-weekly basis. In addition, one researcher was always present at any two or three-way conference that occurred among student teacher-cooperating teacher, student teacher-cooperating teacher-university supervisor, student teacher-university supervisor, or cooperating teacher-university supervisor. Most of the conferences and

interviews were tape recorded. The university supervisor was interviewed weekly or more often and kept an audiotape log of events, feelings, conversations, or other relevant matters that loomed large during a week. Finally, each researcher kept field notes of observations.

From this residue, transcripts were made of each audiotape. Field notes and transcripts were compiled in a file and numbered chronologically. Analysis was begun in the Summer of 1979, when each of the researchers read through the entire compilation and suggested themes that the data seemed to suggest were important. This initial set of themes was then passed among all participants, who reacted to their probable validity. The analysis was continued during the Fall and Winter of 1979/80. At numerous meetings, the three primary researchers sat together and compared and cross-indexed actual transcriptions of incidents or conversations to previously established themes.

Results. During the Winter of 1980, these themes were clustered into three broad categories.

I. Focus on student teaching and the student teacher;

II. Focus on supervision and analysis in student teaching; and

III. The communications process

A small sample of the 39 themes can illustrate the findings:

1. Student teachers do what is asked of them many times only because they think they have to in order to fulfill an assignment.

2. There are many barriers or reasons why student teachers think they can't do any better than they do in student teaching.

3. Student teachers talk about an ideology of teaching, but do not reflect one in their teaching.

4. During student teaching, students begin to realize that teaching is something different than teaching kids to learn.

5. Student teaching does not necessarily cause the student to be a better teacher; on the contrary it may reinforce bad habits.

6. Early perceptions of student teachers and cooperating teachers by their university supervisor tend to continue to impact on the supervisor throughout the course of the experience.

7. There are different levels of privileged information which either should or should not be shared during student teaching.

8. The supervision provided by the cooperating teacher and the university supervisor may result in contradicting advice from the two.

SOME ETHICAL PROBLEMS

In the typical fieldwork study, the researcher heads for the field with great trepidation, goes through a period when trust among parties is established, and is admitted to the most intimate rites of passage. As the researcher finishes his or her data collection the sun sets in the western sky, the reseracher leaves the setting forever as fond farewell waves of friendship are exchanged among researcher and natives.

In this study there were no Hollywood endings, no soft background music, and few waves. Yet, this study cannot be called atypical. Elaborating the problems here can perhaps lessen the grief for future fieldworkers.

Acquiring Permission to Execute the Study. Imagine Margaret Mead asking each New Guinian whom she anticipated observing, interviewing, photographing, or filming, to sign an institutional human subjects consent form. If the image is silly, no less real is the requirement upon fieldworkers today to protect the rights of human subjects. This ethical responsibility has been duly recognized in social science for some

time; take the AAA Code of Ethics, for example, which discusses the issue in general terms. What is often overlooked, however, is the fact that educational researchers are now bound by multiple sets of formal restrictions concerning data-gathering in experimental or field settings. In short, "convert" is out and "full disclosure" is in. This study is illustrative of the degree to which subjects' rights often impede the normal establishment of relations with cultural members. This study was done, of course, in an elementary school. Before the study could be started, these steps were all taken:

1. A four-page human subjects questionnaire was completed and submitted six weeks prior to beginning the study.
2. As part of the human subjects package, complete interview protocols were required for any interviews that were anticipated.
3. Copies of consent forms for the three student teachers, were drafted and submitted.
4. All parties were briefed in detail.
5. All parties signed the consent forms.

Of course, none of this was difficult mechanically, and the point is not that paperwork is a burden upon the researcher. But the emphasis on possible dangers to student teacher, cooperating teachers or students never went away. The positive beginning that fieldworkers hope for was undermined. Members rarely understood the methodology when it was explained, and yet it had to be explained, since anonymity had to be preserved; when student teachers were told that they would be interviewed and possibly videotaped, one wanted to know:

Student Teacher: "When will I be videotaped?"

Researcher: "We're not sure at this point."

Student Teacher: "Why aren't you sure?"

Researcher: "It's too early in the study to know the exact day we'll want to tape you. Let's see how things progress - when you feel confident and have the class by yourself, probably."

Student Teacher: "If you videotape and I look bad, or have a bad day, can I throw the tape away?"

Researcher: "I was hoping we could watch the tapes together so as to get some ideas of intentionality, purpose, etc."

Student Teacher: "Well, don't you have to throw it away if I say so? It says right here on this form that you can't do anything I don't want you to do?"

Researcher: "Yes, of course -- we'll erase it if you wish." (sob).

This conversation highlights the beginning nature of the student teaching experience. They, just like us, were having entry problems of their own kind, and were justifiably anxious to save face and appear confident. These were not recalcitrant student teachers, just student teachers.

How Far to Dig. As Geertz advises in his classic 1973 book,

> (We must) . . . struggle to draw broad generalizations out of special instances, to penetrate deeply enough into detail to discover something more than detail. (p. 311)

This advice is certainly well-taken; but in practice, there are few who care to expose even semi-intimate details of their history. Theodore Adorno, speaking of Freud's methods, which often are mimicked in fieldwork, said, "In psychoanalysis nothing is true except the exaggerations." For fieldworkers to get at the truth via those exaggerations, especially which strain even the most trusting relationship. Yet, the competent fieldworker must always be trying to put

disparate pieces together so that an understandable whole emerges. In the case of our study, we were well aware that retrospective experiences of the student teachers had much to do with the way they interpreted and valued the reality into which they were thrust. As well, these retrospective experiences impacted each of their lives during student teaching to a great degree. In these days of the "permissive 80's", however, much of the present circumstances of each of the student teachers were in conflict with the rather conservative mien of the university and its representatives. One of the student teachers had just undergone a prolonged divorce and change of lifestyle; a second was in the process of being dumped by the male sharing her living quarters; the third was now living in a sorority house because of a personal crisis that had almost caused her to drop out of school the previous year. All these areas, their impact on the 10 weeks, their influence on the future of each of these student teachers, could not be ignored, yet were in a sense off limits. It would have been helpful when puzzling incidents arose to be able to relate histories to them. But this was not often the case.

Doing Collaborative Research. Collaborative research is in, exciting, and enervating. It is also frought with ethical issues. No matter what the research, the researcher must remain in the driver's seat, hopefully sitting high enough off the road to see over the next hill while simultaneously relying on a sometimes vociferous backseat driver, often, one who neither knows how to drive or knows the route.

The researcher must keep the collaborator apprised of critical events, so that member analysis gets done and can be compared to the researcher's analysis. At the same time, unobtrusiveness must prevail, anonymity be protected, names must be changed to protect the innocent, roles must not be violated, and most importantly, the study must progress as naturally as it can, given the tensions created by contradictory tugs. In this study, for example, the university supervisor treated the student teachers quite differently. After Pygmalion in the classroom, (Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968) this finding should come as a surprise to no one. It is nevertheless an important finding, one which at some time in the study needed to be bounced off the student teachers. In this study, Researcher 1 broached the subject at about the fourth week, received a vigorous rebuff and denial by both the student teachers and the univesity supervisor; again at the eighth week, when all parties now agreed that yes, it was real, but didn't matter to anyone, and again at the 10th week, when the impact of differential treatment could be calmly discussed.

"The More You Tell, The Worse You Look". A fourth problem area encountered in this study is representative of an area of concern regarding the level of candor one can expect from vulnerable participants. It concerns how much information can be revealed to researchers by participants without endangering the participants' positive image or position.

An example best explains this problem. The supervisor represented in this study was both participant and observer, and thus quite knowledgable about the nature and purpose of the study. She was also totally committed to absolute candor in reporting incidents and observations about the student teaching experience. Consequently the supervisor

reported, with considerable openness, on her reactions to the three student teachers and the three teachers in the study.

A good example was her free admission that her first impressions of the student teachers and the teachers somewhat biased later impressions that she had of these six participatns. Sometime later in the study the supervisor was reported by the researchers as being biased. This conclusion on the part of the researchers was a fair conclusion given that the supervisor admitted bias. Whether the researchers would have uncovered this information had the supervisor chosen not to report it is a moot point. But by reporting her bias the supervisor guaranteed that at least part of her characterization would include "damaging" findings.

The participant must ask him or herself, "How much information can I share about myself without damaging my public image? I know the researchers have told me that the study is not an evaluation. But I also know that by making personal revelations which I feel reflect on me negatively that this information can be used against me."

Both parties are caught in a dilemma. If participants do not share information then the researchers' conclusions are founded less on personal admission than on intuition or second-hand assumptions. This makes the researchers' conclusions less substantial than if they could report these conslusions as drawn from something a participant shares verbally.

It would therefore seem natural for people to withhold information which reflected negatively on them. In the relationship among the researchers, including the participant researcher, a great deal of trust existed. Nevertheless, negative revelations were used to build a

negative case. Even where trust existed, the researchers had to act on the information they were given. They could not be blamed for using negative information, because it was data collected in the study.

It is unlikely that this dilemma will be resolved by merely discussing the issue. But it is useful to know that such an issue exists and can complicate the type of study reported herein. Perhaps the most honest disclosure that can be made on the part of the researchers is, "if you as a participant say something which reflects negatively upon you as a participant, it is highly likely that this information will be used in the critical analysis of the events associated with the study." Told that directly, the only person who would share candidly is one who has a stake in unedited outcomes. Some people are altruistic enough to share openly and honestly during the process of such a study. Others may feel invulnerable enough to be gracious hosts. Others may acquiesce in deference to the "good researcher" effect (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1969). But many may feel threatened, vulnerable, and guard closely what they say and do. Since data quality directly hinges on these considerations, researchers may as well be candid in their explanation to participants of what use may follow in the sharing of the data.

Discussion. A reader might, at this point, simply lay this article down in disgust and remark, "No study should have had this many problems!" What the reader should realize, however, is that fieldwork is fieldwork exactly because parameters can never be predefined, experimental scripts cannot be prewritten. If such problems had not occurred,

the study would have been superficially done; if the problems were not reported, the study could be said to be dishonestly represented; and if the researchers glibly thought nothing was awry at all, the study would be said to be a waste of 9 persons' time. Things must go wrong in fieldwork -- science and mundane existance must often merge and become imperceptible if the fieldworker is to benefit from the simultaneous insider-outsider interpretations that only true involvement can be given him or her.

This study provided four problem areas. The question arises, then, what could have been done to diminish or eliminate the strife? By asking this question we can discover if the problems were easily resolvable by some simple means or whether we should dig deeper for answers.

One explanation is that the researchers were to blame, that through some inexperience, carelessness, or ignorance, trust among all could have been quickly established.

On a gut level, as well as a more scientific one, that does not seem to be the case here. On the whole, the study went reasonably well; in addition, one of the advantages of field studies is that they are not bound by laboratory constraints -- when things go wrong, the wise field researcher will use them to advantage. As a team, we tended to rely upon one another to a great extent for analyzing incidents and determining the next best step. Thus, most of the strategies of the team were discussed and predetermined to some extent -- there was not a great deal of "spur of the moment" decision-making, which might be taken as a characteristic of an inexperienced researcher. Neither

was the strategy, the particular approach used, dreamed up out of thin air. Rather, it was routine, with routine kinds of data-gathering techniques, for example, observations or interviews. Finally, we did, as much as possible, use every incident, occurrence, event, as a interpretive tool, so even if the taste in our mouth was bitter, the event shed light upon the questions we had asked in the study, or led us to ask better questions.

A second culprit might be considered the methodology. One might ask if another qualitative methodology might have not been more suitable. We might, for example, have used totally covert participant observation. We could have used a more distanced, less collaborative method, in which the researcher kept a certain distance form the participants. Or we might have even used some experimental mode of inquiry.

Again, our feeling is that our study is "thicker," richer, more cogent and honest because of the collaborative, interactive, multiple perspective approach we used. Covert research is being done today — the ethical issues involved in the covert mode are questions beyond the scope of this paper (for further elaboration, see Hilburt, in press). We believe that our methodology was fitting.

A final alternative upon which to fix blame might be the technology itself. In this regard, perhaps we should have used only video to aid in the collaborative effort rather than person-to-person interviews. Video does have the effect of providing a neutral stimulus

to wage interpretive battle which face to face communication sometimes lacks. Or perhaps a technology better than video will come upon the scene soon. The ultimate black box would obviously be one which turned probing reserach questions into tactful conversation openers, while at the same time providing a 24-hour synopsis of the life of every cultural member under study. Until such time as this machine is invented we are still, for better or worse, the instrument.

It seems clear that the problem is not one of poor researcher, bad methodology or inappropriate technology. The problems stemmed, in retrospect, from the nature of the ethical considerations which operated in the study.

Berlin, speaking of the condition of social and political man, made this observation:

> One of the deepest assumptions of Western thought is the conviction that there exist true, immutable, universal, timeless objective values, valid for all men, everywhere, at all times; that these values are at least in principle realizable, whether or not human beings are, or have been or ever will be, capable of realizing them on earth; that these values form a coherent system, a harmony which, conceived in social terms, constitutes the perfect society. (1980, p. 40)

Berlin goes on to argue that the universal values, the system, and the harmony simply do not exist, even though all of us would like them to.

Examples of what Berlin calls "incompatible values," "competing alternatives," can be understood by the illustration of different levels of dilemmas we are faced with in real life. On the lowest level, barely qualifying under the sense of the word dilemma, are everyday trivial decisions we all make — which shirt to wear to work (assuming we own more than one). On a bit higher level are what can be

called resolvable options: whether to pay for the son's braces with cash or take a vacation and charge the orthodontia; whether to continue a disliked job or chuck it in and face the dole. When we move to the next level, however, Berlin's argument for the falsity of universal assumptions gains strength. On a level more complex than the two above are what can be called unresolvable options. Examples are numerous: we want equal education yet the admission to college by merit; we want lower inflation yet the comfort of plentiful artificially price-stabilized gasoline; we want an advanced chemical technology yet immunity from carcinogenic pollutants in our air, water, and food (cf. Lieberson & Morganbesser, 1980).

In the same sense, fieldworkers are faced with unresolvable options when they want unrestricted access to any information necessary to understand a cultural community and want to operate at the same time on the false premise of universal values and the harmony principle. Fieldworkers have been slow to admit that such a set of inquiry requirements are but another example of an unresolvable option. In contrast, in experimental research, those facets which strengthen its design are exactly those which obviate the ethical question. In the laboratory, members are called "subjects", are asked to do only one thing, and are told beforehand exactly what the one thing is. Research in this sense is objective, because subject participation is separated from subject belief, values, or ethics. On the other hand, in fieldwork, we want access to everything, and only have the uneasily ambiguous "Trust me. . ." to give a potential participant. We want

trust to be established quickly (so the research can make progress) and yet refuse to limit the scope of our inquiry. What we are faced with in an unresolvable option. The former leaves us with a tainted, etic product; the latter leaves us with an incomplete or shallow one.

What does this all mean in terms of ethics? We submit that this discussion takes us back to our original theses: that ethics, normally thought of as "the system or code of morals of a. . . group" (Webster's), must be redefined when fieldwork is done to connote the meaning shared between two persons in a particular research situation. Simply said, what is ethical according to the AAA Code of Ethics may very well be considered horridly immoral by an anxious student teacher. When a participant waives his/her right a) to restrict certain lines of questioning, b) to control the dissemination of any final reports, c) to edit any copy used in future presentations, d) to see primary field notes, 3) to possibly face an altered experience due to the insightfulness of researchers, unresolvable options suddenly rear up. In the usual case, such questions are not raised. A hypnotically charming researcher can coopt his or her subjects into signing an omnibus waiver. But doing so is not playing fair. The researcher is using the assumption of universal values held by the naive participant as a card up his sleeve.

The point here is not whether any set of practices are ethical or unethical, but rather whether it is possible for a field researcher to set the unresolvable options issue aside when doing fieldwork. The only solution likely to resolve the issue is to move to particularistic

contractual-type negotiations when a fieldwork study is done. In such a situation, researcher and participant would negotiate some items in advance, but reserve the bulk of the decisions concerning what constituted mutually ethical practices for each specific situation.

Ethnography, field study, qualitative analysis, fieldwork, whatever the name, has been recently embraced as the cureall for stuffy, trivial educational research. If, however, fieldwork done in institutional settings contains unresolvable options, we should ask whether ethnography is the proper replacement for other approaches which appear to some, on the surface, to be irrational and oppressive. Fieldwork causes anxiety, conflict, tension. Ethical dilemmas do arise to which there are only unresolvable options. As Lieberson & Morganbesser say,

> (to) reduce conflict hastily and artifically by logical or theoretical means. . . is a species of self-deception that can. . . lead to absurdities in theory and barbarous consequences in practice. (p. 40)

We would be well to carry this caveat with us to the field.

Footnotes

1. Our thanks to Professor Robert Everhart for permission to use his timely title.

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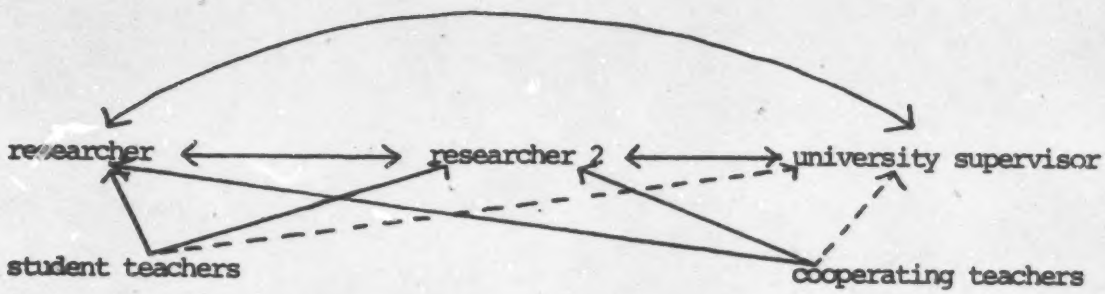
Figure Caption

Figure 1. Communication among study participants


researcher
researcher 2
university supervisor
student teachers
cooperating teachers